

The Potential Power of Internships and The Impact on Career Preparation

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Abstract:

The educational community is tasked with preparing students for career-ready positions. Aligned with skill development and curriculum content, experiential learning has often proven beneficial for students to reinforce concepts and provide a transfer of learning and application. Internships, prior to graduation, seem to provide a win-win opportunity for the student in the form of real-world, experiential learning. The organization benefits by receiving additional resources at a reduced rate and an opportunity to determine whether the individual will be a good fit for the culture and the position. This paper will seek to explore this relationship to determine whether the outcomes are positive and may lead to increased job offers and quicker employability. In addition, this will include some research on the attributes of students who pursue internships.

Keywords: internships, student learning outcomes, assessment, career, employment

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INTRODUCTION

An internship is defined as ‘any official or formal program to provide practical experience for beginners in an occupation or profession, according to Dictionary.com. More specifically, The National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) describes an internship as “a form of experiential learning that integrates knowledge and theory learned in the classroom with practical application and skills development in a professional setting” (2018). These internships predominately provide an opportunity for undergraduate, graduate students and those changing careers to receive hands-on exposure to their chosen field of study or a new career, either in a paid or unpaid environment.

To provide some uniformity and standards, NACE has determined that these 7 criteria should be applied as a litmus test to be considered an internship:

- The experience must be an extension of the classroom: a learning experience that provides for applying the knowledge gained in the classroom. It must not be simply to advance the operations of the employer or be the work that a regular employee would routinely perform.
- The skills or knowledge learned must be transferable to other employment settings.
- The experience has a defined beginning and end, and a job description with desired qualifications.
- There are clearly defined learning objectives/goals related to the professional goals of the student’s academic coursework.
- There is supervision by a professional with expertise and educational and/or professional background in the field of the experience.
- There is routine feedback by the experienced supervisor.
- There are resources, equipment, and facilities provided by the host employer that support learning objectives/goals (2018).

Many universities offer academic credit for students, whereby students work at the organization’s site for a number of hours equating to the number of class hours. For example, 3 academic credits would require 120 hours worked for the organization. If the internships are for credit, they are then supervised by a professional at the work site and an academic professional from the respective university. In this way, students are able to immerse themselves in a job site, test their respective skills, and apply concepts learned throughout their curriculum. Since universities have a primary goal to prepare students for career-ready positions, internships can afford students a site to apply their skills in their first real-world workplace. This experience can often be valuable for the students as they are afforded a new lens through which they can evaluate their chosen field of study, while also determining the pros/cons of the industry and the specific organizational culture of their chosen site. This time can be maximized if the student is given job-related tasks, projects, networking events and opportunities, etc. Jones, (2006) refers to this as previewing a profession. From an employer’s perspective, they can receive additional resources and a quick, inexpensive review of potential new - hires for their future to fill their talent pipeline. This extended training period, often a college semester, can be mutually beneficial and can often translate into a job offer. If internships can serve as a competitive differentiator for employment after graduation, then universities may also want to review their respective policies and expand their programs and networks to include more external stakeholders and site locations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In a 2016 Looksharp study entitled, *State of Millennial Hiring Report*, 21,000 students responded to questions regarding hiring by industry, location and business size. New entrepreneurial companies are beginning to realize the allure of interns while mid-size companies between 50 and 500 employees remain most popular for intern sites. Some other findings are listed below:

- Internships are a critical element in determining career success. There are strong correlations between having at least one internship and improved job prospects after graduation and finding employment in the respective field of study.
- Expectations after graduation may be unrealistic. There's a \$9,000 gap between college seniors' salary expectations and actual starting salaries.
- Demand for internships is higher than supply. Among the 31.5% who said they had not completed an internship to date, more than 70% said they had searched unsuccessfully.

According to this research, there is also a correlation between multiple internships and job placement. Graduates who fulfill the internship requirements for 3 or more sites are more likely to receive full-time job offers. Slightly over 81% of the interns responded that these experiences helped them either shift the focus of their majors/classes or adjust their career plans.

NACE published a 2016 *Internship & Co-op Survey*, that encompassed 20 industries and 271 different organizations. Key findings from the program section indicated that internship work responsibilities remain relatively unchanged and employers still prioritize analytical and problem-solving duties first with project management and communications following. For outcomes in this portion of the study, employers' singular goal is to hire interns as full-time employees. The conversion rate currently is higher now than in more than a decade at almost 62%.

A further article by Salticoff, (2017) affirmed the positive correlation between internships and employment. Referencing a study conducted by the Endicott College Research Center, 327 / 1680 surveys were completed by internship supervisors between 2011 and 2016. The results were definitive, stating that from the 2015 graduate pool, 98% were employed in various capacities, both full and part-time and 53% indicated that their current jobs had a direct connection to their internship or contacts obtained during their internship.

Mount Holyoke College in conjunction with the NACE Center for Career Development and Talent Acquisition (Townsend, Lierman, Watermill, and Rousseau, 2017) revealed that the number of internships combined with a student's grade point average are the keys to positive early career outcomes either in securing an initial job post-graduation or entering a graduate program within 6 months. Compared to those who did not secure an internship, students who participated in 2 or more internships, were also twice as likely to find employment within 6 months of graduation.

Relevant work experience is also key for hiring managers. By analyzing resume audits, Nunley, Pugh, Romero, and Seals (2016) found that internships can improve a candidate's ability to acquire an interview at a rate that is by 14% higher than those who did not choose an internship. "Door openers" was the term used by Saniter and Siedler (2014) when referring to these potential placements. Again, this research confirms a positive relationship between some industry-related experience garnered from internships and the next step in career progression.

In a study by Cappelli, (2014), he asserts that there is little to no evidence of a skills gap, but rather there is a skills mismatch or even that candidates may be over-qualified with more

education than the requirement for the position. Internships may even support the notion that any skills mismatch may be minimized with on-site, experiential internships.

Work - based learning or learning at a job site seems to correlate to enhanced job prospects, specifically immediately following graduation. This paper seeks to understand the impact of internships on students' job opportunities and employability post-graduation.

DATA AND RESULTS

This study utilized Slippery Rock University (SRU) as a case example. SRU is a public university and a member of the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education, which enrolls a diverse student body from primarily the tri - state areas and the state of Pennsylvania, with a total enrollment of approximately 8,900 students. SRU offers a full range of traditional academic programs including Bachelors, Master's and doctoral degrees. In many ways, SRU reflects the institutional characteristics of a representative major public university in the country.

To collect data on student internship opportunities in the School of Business, a survey was designed to gather information on student internship sites, the way in which such internships were obtained by the students, whether these opportunities led to a job offer and the overall effectiveness of internship experiences. This survey was administered through the Career Education and Services office of the university. There were 88 responses / 230 to the survey (44 percent response rate), who provided information regarding the internship experiences and how that aided in career connections. In terms of the student attributes, an average GPA of 3.23 is reported. About 43 percent of the respondents are female, and the average age is 27 years. Since the SAT scores for incoming freshmen fluctuate over time as the tests change, the average scores reported is consistent with today's average which is slightly over 1000, around 1094.

Survey results indicated respondents' year of graduation from SRU range from 2007 to 2019. The majority (over 15 percent) of the respondents are graduating in May 2019, over 10 percent graduated in 2014, about 8 percent in 2016 and 6 percent in 2007. Hence the data includes both recent graduates as well as past graduates, which gives us the opportunity to measure the impact of internships on the career outcomes for the students.

There were a variety of different sites where students did an internship before graduating from the school of business. Amongst the internship sites reported in the survey, the recurrent ones were Pittsburgh Pirates, Pittsburgh Steelers, The Volunteer Income Tax Assistance program (VITA) for lower-income tax preparation, and various YMCA locations. About 21 percent of the internship sites were higher education institutions. Others included manufacturing, insurance, banking, etc.

One of the challenges that students face in securing an internship is being able to utilize network opportunities that they develop during their time in school and work. Successful completion of internships is a predominant factor in future career success. The Career Education and Services office often works with faculty departments, and clubs and organizations to ensure students from freshmen to seniors are steadily working towards a rewarding and meaningful career. The career presentations and workshops include resume & cover letter development, successful interviewing strategies, LinkedIn & professional networking, social media & technology in the job search, job & internship searching, bills, budgets, & benefits and salary negotiations. These are useful resources for students seeking internship opportunities. The survey results indicate around 25 percent of respondents reported career office (as indicated in Figure 1, Appendix), faculty and advisors referring them to the internship openings. A majority 45 percent

of respondents reported searching company websites and responding to advertisements posted as the primary means of obtaining internships.

Internships are important because of the career connections and networking opportunities that start with such openings. Frequently, with the conclusion of a successful internship, students are offered their first full-time jobs with the same organization. Figure 2 (Appendix) reports that almost a third of the students were offered a full-time position. Forty - two percent of the respondents were not offered a job at the end of the internship term. Amongst the primary reason for not having a job offer following an internship, was the unavailability of an open position. Some respondents indicated that they were offered a full-time position at the site after one or two years of completion of the internship. Others indicated that they were not looking for full-time employment after the internship since they were planning on attending graduate school. A few of the respondents had already secured a job offer, prior to doing the internship.

Out of the ones who were offered a job at the conclusion of the internship, a majority (67 percent) accepted the job offer. The benefits of an internship are evident in the increasing number of students who successfully completed the internship and were able to secure a full-time job after completion of the internship requirements. Within this group who accepted the position, most of them indicated in the survey response that they were very satisfied with their current salary and benefits package. The internship opportunity provided them with an option of applying their knowledge and skill set to a real-world marketplace, and further give them the career transition choice.

Amongst the students who decided not to accept the job offer after the internship, a variety of reasons were provided, the main were returning to graduate school in an MBA program. These students were aiming for a career advancement, and utilized the experience gained in the internship towards applications to graduate programs. Others indicated that they wanted to explore further opportunities in quest of higher salaries and better positions. In contrast, some students also decide that the field and/or site may not be the right fit for them, which is also valuable insight that is gained early in the process and relatively risk-free.

In analyzing the impact of internships on career advancements, the survey responses also indicated that for the vast majority of students, internships provided the applications- oriented experience that they required for a successful performance in a job. A majority of the respondents who did accept a job offer at the end of the internship did not continue with that organization after two years. 86 percent of these respondents made a career transition within two years of the initial job acceptance. This indicates the effectiveness of an internship opportunity for the students, whereby they gain the hands-on experience, and have the job offer, and are more prepared to make the career transition decisions in the future.

In response to the question on the effectiveness of the internship opportunity, a majority (40 percent) of survey responses confirmed that the real-world application and hands-on experience obtained from the internship to be the most important impact of the internship (Figure 3, Appendix). A substantial number of respondents indicated that gaining experience working in the field was one of the most useful benefits from an internship. These experiences enhance the application of the concepts taught in class, and aid in the career connection opportunities for students. Building strong networks was one of the other practical aspects of doing an internship. These networks have helped students secure jobs as well as switch jobs that offered better prospects and career progression. A significant number of respondents also indicated that the internship experience helped them realize that their choice of major and subsequent career choice was indeed the right option for them. By doing the internship, they had a much better idea about

the skill requirements of the job, which helped them make the career choice. Finally, one of the other positive aspects of internship as noted by respondents were developing time management skills. Being in a real job scenario, students had the opportunity to get acquainted with how work life proceeds. Through an internship, the students were able to realize how to best manage time between their job and other responsibilities and were much better prepared for their work-life balance as they transitioned into their respective career paths. Respondents unanimously agreed on how essential and effective the internship opportunities were for them and recommended such an experience for every student to be successful in their future careers.

Future research could include investigating additional attributes and a longitudinal study of career progression after acceptance of the initial job offer. Also, as more information is captured in exit interviews and from alumni, this data could prove invaluable to higher education administrators to strengthen and expand internship programs, sites, placement, etc.

CONCLUSIONS

Most research confirms the validity of internships and the value that they bring to both the employer and the student. The mutually beneficial nature of these experiences was confirmed in this research. Although students and interns are not required to be paid by the Fair Labor Standards Act, many are, equating to another positive attribute of this form of on-the-job training. Internships are still learning tools and are not a guarantee of job success. They do, however, often position the intern as a top candidate for available full-time openings. In a world where educators are training students for jobs that don't exist, skill development and experiential learning are paramount and afford students excellent opportunities for growth. Universities now have considerable evidence to expand and enhance their respective placements in organizational sites where partnerships can flourish.



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APPENDIX

Figure 1: Obtaining the Internship

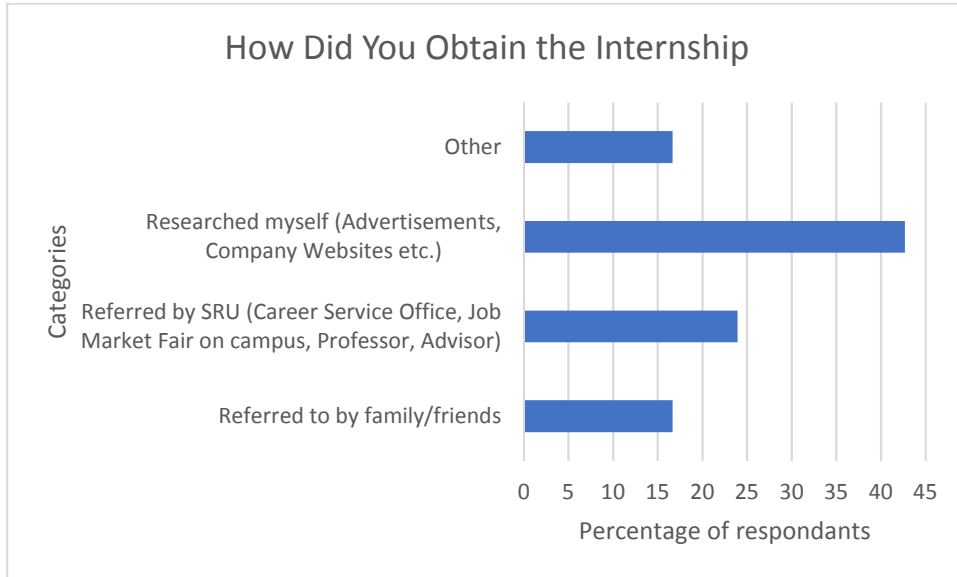


Figure 2: Job Offers Following Internship

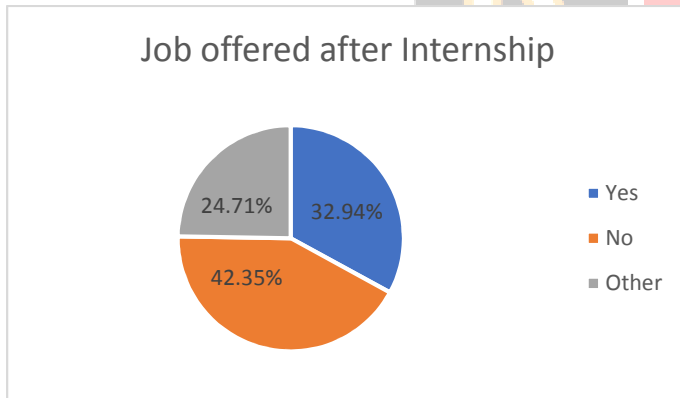


Figure 3: Effectiveness of Internship Opportunities

